



Urban LandMark

making urban land markets work for the poor

PRESS RELEASE

OCTOBER 4, 2007

WHAT THE POOR ACTUALLY SAY ABOUT GETTING A PLACE TO LIVE IN SA'S CITIES

The biggest obstacle poor people say they face in getting a place to live in the cities is the formal property market, which sets land prices at levels higher than they can afford. Implementation of government policy was also seen as not favouring the poor enough.

These observations come from an Urban LandMark report that details the views of community organisations about access to urban land by the poor. The report, *Voices of the Poor*, by the Development Action Group, emanates from a series of workshops held around the country in partnership with various development NGOs.

Community organisations generally saw the formal land market as alien to the poor, though some community representatives felt estate agents might emerge in low-income areas to play a valuable role in brokering property transactions.

Although there was an implicit desire for greater access to mortgage finance, people's past experiences had generally been negative. A typical view was, "After getting a bond it's so hard to pay it off you end up in the informal settlement again."

Perceptions of the market operating around RDP housing were mainly negative. In some settlements councillors who bought up RDP houses were seen as part of the problem. Despite this, an underlying theme was the importance of the state housing subsidy scheme that supplies these houses. Many participants regarded the scheme as their only hope of getting formal housing and land in the city. Informal sale of RDP houses was seen as inevitable, despite the legal restriction on resale of these houses for the first five years. One community representative said: "People sell their houses because they are hungry and need the money. Also, those who come from the rural areas sell their houses because they have another home in the rural area to fall back on, or they want to go home to retire."

Informal tenure arrangements, where people exchange houses and land through personal agreements, were generally seen as quick and flexible, and could work well if there were strong community organisations to monitor and control access. However, perceptions of informal tenure arrangements are coloured by perceptions about life in informal settlements generally. They are seen as uncertain, uncomfortable, unsanitary and unsafe.

One community representative summed up how people feel about life in informal settlements: “People don’t know when they will be moved or what the conditions at the place they will be relocated to are like. There is no sanitation. There is no water. There is no electricity. People’s health and safety are at risk.”

Participants suggested a range of actions to help the poor access urban land. At all the workshops, land audits to identify vacant and underused land were seen as crucial. There were calls for the state to be more energetic in acquiring and releasing land for the poor. There were also calls for greater state intervention in granting land rights to ensure that land is more affordable for all. An example that was mentioned was leasing state land to the poor rather than selling well-located state land.

Community networking to jointly lobby for greater access to urban land was also seen as crucial, but help is needed. Numerous participants identified access to information as vital. Information was needed about, among other things, people’s rights, vacant land, government procedures, the Housing Subsidy Scheme, credit from banks and how to access it, and the property market.

Also important was increased consultation with communities in decision-making about urban land issues. Many communities all around the country are resisting relocation from the areas where they live to peripheral areas far from jobs and facilities, and want to participate in any decisions affecting them.

The report reinforces the need for the state to be responsive to community initiatives and for increased access to information about the market. Over and over again participants said decision-makers do not understand their real problems and issues. Urban LandMark hopes that this report will contribute to highlighting the need to overcome this divide, especially at local level, where communities are struggling for access to well-located urban land.

The full report is available at www.urbanlandmark.org.za/archive.html

Queries can be directed to Mark Napier, Urban LandMark Programme Director at 012 342 7636 or 082 4589330

Urban LandMark was set up in May 2006 with funding from the UK’s Department for International Development. Urban LandMark aims to play a catalytic role in bringing people together for dialogue. It aims to influence policies and practices in South Africa to improve poor people’s access to well-located urban land.

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